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At What Cost Our Spirit by David M. Valadez

In an increasingly secular age, and regardless of what the goals of modern Aikido have become for many, Budo proper has us questing for nothing short of Awakening. It is best to understand Awakening as the practice of becoming fully human. Awakening is the confrontation of our own humanity by the process of reconciling both our limitations and our infinitude. As the average investments of life form us into various ways of occupying our time, as well as increasingly addressing that time as separate from and contrary to our spiritual fulfillment, we may wonder, “How much time and effort am I to dedicate to my own humanity?” At such times, questions of cost, gain, and relevance, come to the forefront of our reasoning. Depending upon where we are in life, it is very possible that our reason will dictate, according to slanted notions of practicality, that time for spiritual development should be limited, postponed, or even done away with altogether. At such times, we are primed to face “more pressing matters.” We cannot see the silliness of suggesting that our humanity can be put in the back seat of life. We cannot see the silliness of suggesting that our own humanity can at times be deemed irrelevant to whatever we may be doing, thinking, or saying.

Once when I asked my teacher how much he practiced a day, he answered, “I practice twenty-four hours a day.” Wanting to only see if my training time was adequate to follow his example of skill in the art, I was not wholly ready for his answer. Much of it escaped me at the time. I could not totally see the fusion of life and practice that he was attempting to point me toward. The practice for me was still a matter of doing something while not doing something else. To be sure, it was the contrast of my life against his, and the commitment that I had to my own training through this man, that provided the transformative energy necessary for me to more closely follow in his footsteps and thereby come to see life and practice as one. Therefore, regardless of how spiritually immature it may be, this seeing of training as time away from other things is an important step in our progress. We should engage it fully. We can do this by bringing a broader perspective to our considerations. Thus, when we ask, “How much time should I give to my own humanity?,” we should also ask, “How much time do I give to my favorite television shows?” “How much time do I give to my favorite sports or games?” “How much time do I give to my hobbies?” “How much time do I give to my family and friends?” Etc. Aside from these questions of comparison, we might also want to ask, “How much should the fulfillment of one’s own humanity cost?” “How much time and energy should one dedicate to one’s own spirit?” “Is there a price too great to pay in terms of time and energy when it comes to reconciling our own limitations and infinitude?”

As I thought of such things when my teacher was trying to point me toward different answers and different questions, I also thought back to my days of running Cross Country in high school. Our team was very good. We won the district championship very easily in a very talented field. We broke school

records. Etc. Sure, it was not the Olympic Training Camp of later years. It was not the big ponds of national and international level competitions that I would face in other sports when I was a young man. As boys of around sixteen, we were not concerning ourselves with seeing who was the fastest in the world. We just wanted to win races – the races we happened to be in. Still, we trained twice a day. We trained once in the morning - before school. We trained once in the afternoon - after school. Training runs ranged from about eight to fifteen miles on the flats or two to three hours covering drills specific to the sport. Inter-district events happened once a week during the weekdays. There were invitational races to compete in on the weekends. Though young, we dedicated great time and energy to our commitment of running Cross Country.

What really was the gain of such commitment? What was I being so committed for? Was I dedicating so many hours so to gain some bragging rights? Was it for gaining popularity at school? Was it to obtain some advantage in competing against other boys in gaining the attention of the opposite sex? Was it so that my name could appear in the local newspaper, so that I could watch a story on me on the evening television news, or was it so that I could have a nice action shot of me running across some finish line in the yearbook? To be sure, these things were obtained, but looking at them now, are they not so petty? Are they not so a matter of small pond mentalities? Where are these things now in my life? Where do they fit in right here, right now, in how, for example, I fulfill my responsibilities as a father to my children? If such things then came out on top when I weighed them against the hours I needed to work in order to obtain them, was I not duped? Did I not pay too much for what I was receiving in return? These questions plagued me when my teacher first proposed to me that I should seek to reconcile the whole of my life with the whole of my training. They still rush to the forefront of my mind today.

As I continued to reflect upon them further, what struck me most was how it was not only we that saw no con at work in what we were paying and in what we were receiving for such things. I was able to note that no one else around us thought that such a cost to benefit ratio was less than reasonable. We did not think it odd to run up to fifteen miles before or after school. We did not think it odd when we were falling asleep in class from fourth to sixth period. We did not think it odd when we were getting home well after dark because practice ran late again. We did not think it odd when we had to struggle through our homework because we were too exhausted at night and left with little time to complete it. We did not think it odd when our running overlapped with our other sports and our other pastimes. Moreover, nor did our teachers, our parents, our friends, our priests, our rabbis, our mentors, etc. It was all “normal.” It was perfectly normal to have such drive over something that could in the end be so fleeting and so petty under the grand scheme of things.

What does this say about us and our world? What does it say when today we struggle so hard to find the time to work upon our own humanity, to train diligently and consistently in our practice, when such effort came to us so easily before, when all that was at stake was petty and fleeting things? What does it say about such things when even now we can be more dedicated to petty and fleeting things as we find it next to impossible to dedicate our energy to something so central as our own humanity? What does it say when our boys can give more time to small victories and small romances when we as mature adults can muster up only half the dedication for something an infinite amount of times more valuable?

Such questions made me wonder: Is it that the goal of Awakening is so lofty, or is it that we are so small, so petty, and so fleeting? What my teacher tried to tell me, and what I believe now, is that it is the latter that is true. The value of our spirit is beyond measure. Thus, our efforts to cultivate that spirit should also be beyond measure. We should be able and willing to meet the costs of our spirit.